

# Over 16 dead in Bengal panchayat polls violence, ballot boxes set on fire or stolen; Bengal SEC says will look into demands for re-poll: Key developments

TIMESOFINDIA.COM | Jul 8, 2023, 10.50 PM IST



Over 16 dead in Bengal panchayat polls violence, ballot boxes set on fire or stolen; Bengal SEC says will look into

Congress and ISF died in different incidents of violence spread across West Bengal.

NEW DELHI: The BJP has demanded President's Rule to be imposed in West Bengal after at least 16 deaths were reported due to poll violence during Saturday's three-tier panchayat elections.

Meanwhile, West Bengal State Election Commissioner (SEC) Rajiva Sinha has promised to look into complaints of vote tampering and to take a decision on possible re-polling at sensitive booths that reported the largest number of violent incidents.

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According to police officials, around 12 people, including eight from the ruling TMC, and one worker each of the BJP, CPI(M),

Other media reports claimed that around 16 people have died. Sinha, however, said his office had been directly told that three deaths were reported.

The polling began at 7am in 73,887 seats in the rural areas of the state with 5.67 crore people deciding the fate of around 2.06 lakh candidates. Till 5pm, 66.28% voter turnout was recorded. The counting of votes will be held on July 11.

Several incidents of ballot box and ballot paper looting, as well as destruction, were reported from numerous polling booths in the State.

*Here are the top developments through the day:*

BJP demands CBI probe into violence

After visiting the state election commission office to lodge a complaint regarding widespread violence during the panchayat polls, Leader of the Opposition Suwendu Adhikari demanded a probe by central agencies into the incidents.

"Democracy has been wiped off ... we demanded the examination of CCTV visuals and repolling in areas where there was violence and the CCTV was not working," said Adhikari.

"Section 144 should be imposed in the violence-affected areas and CAPF should be deployed on all the booths. Today we are wearing black bands as it is Black Day for democracy. We demand CBI, and NIA probe after today's incident. I will ask the state election commissioner to direct CM Mamata Banerjee to compensate Rs 50 lakh to the deceased," he added.

Meanwhile, an individual identified as Manish Prasad, reportedly a BJP worker, was arrested after he entered the

SEC office and said that he wished to throw black ink on Sinha for his alleged failure to control violence in the polling process.

Ballot boxes set on fire, stolen

Amid incidents of violence during voting for the Panchayat election across West Bengal, a miscreant ran away with the ballot box from the polling station in Malda's Mahadipur area.

Meanwhile, voting was suspended at Indreshwar primary school in Dinhata, West Bengal's Cooch Behar, after water was thrown into the ballot box.

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In another incident, a ballot box at a polling booth in Baranachina of Dinhata in Cooch Behar district was set on fire allegedly by voters who were angry with bogus voting that was reportedly going on there.

Another incident was reported from Balutola in Gopalpur Panchayat of Malda where a clash broke out between Congress and TMC workers and bombs were hurled.

The polling booth at Baravita Primary School in Sitai of Coochbehar also was vandalised and ballot papers were set on fire.

Several other incidents of ballot box and ballot paper looting and destruction were reported from numerous polling booths in the State.

State BJP chief urges Amit Shah to restore democracy in Bengal

West Bengal BJP president Sukanta Majumdar wrote to Union home minister Amit Shah on Saturday requesting the Centre to restore democracy in the state after it witnessed violence during the panchayat polls.

Majumdar alleged booth capturing, false voting, and rigging in booths across 17 districts.

He further alleged that central forces were not deployed at several sensitive booths where violence broke out.

Most complaints from 4 districts: SEC

Bengal State Election Commissioner (SEC) Rajiva Sinha said the most number of complaints on incidents of violence during the day's polling came from four districts, and they would all be taken into account while reviewing the poll process.

"The maximum number of such incidents on Saturday were reported from three to four districts like North 24 Parganas, South 24 Parganas and Murshidabad district," Sinha said, adding that a decision on re-polling would be taken on Sunday.

The SEC received 1,300 complaints from Barasat including on incidents of miscreants fleeing with ballot boxes.

'Won't let democracy die': Nadda poll violence

Amid reports of violence during voting for the Panchayat election across West Bengal, BJP president JP Nadda on Saturday spoke to the state leader of opposition (LoP) Suvendu Adhikari and BJP West Bengal in-charge

Mangal Pandey on panchayat poll violence and assured them that the BJP won't let democracy die in West Bengal.

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He further assured that the fight against violence by the TMC party will be brought to a conclusion in a democratic way.

"BJP will not let this death of democracy happen, and we will take this fight to a decisive level in a democratic way," said Nadda.

Need President's rule: Adhikari

State Leader of the Opposition Suwendu Adhikari attacked the Trinamool Congress (TMC) for violence during the three-tier panchayat elections in West Bengal, saying that the state is burning and the Central government should intervene with Article 355 or Article 356 (President's Rule).

He alleged that more than 20,000 booths had been captured by hooligans of the ruling party in the presence of police.

"West Bengal Governor CV Ananda Bose is trying his best to save lives and restore peace. But, his appeal has gone to waste as the election-related violence continued in the state," he said.

"More than 15 people have been brutally killed by the goons. More than 20,000 booths have been captured by

TMC hooligans, in the presence of state police. CAPF is totally non-functioning due to the non-cooperation of the district police," Adhikari added.

Voting began on Friday, claims Congress

West Bengal Pradesh Congress president Adhir Chowdhury on Saturday "congratulated" Trinamool Congress supremo Mamata Banerjee for winning the just-concluded violent rural polls, claiming that voting, which was supposed to start at 7am on Saturday, had actually begun on Friday night.

"Ballot boxes were taken out at night, false votes were cast and those were put back in the boxes before being returned to the polling booths," Chowdhury alleged.

The PCC president said the polls were nothing but a farce. "If the polls were not held, then perhaps there wouldn't have been so many deaths," he said.

What happened on Saturday was state-sponsored terrorism, Chowdhury alleged, adding that the BJP will take advantage of the situation as it had done after the 2018 panchayat polls.

Meanwhile, Congress leader Kaustav Bagchi made a representation to the Chief Justice of the Calcutta High Court seeking an urgent hearing of a prayer seeking that Saturday's panchayat elections in West Bengal be declared null and void on account of violence and killings.

Elections must be through ballots, not bullets: Guv

Amid reports of violence in the West Bengal panchayat polls, Governor CV Ananda Bose on Saturday said that elections must be held "through ballots not bullets," and said the day should be considered as the "most sacred" for democracy."

"I have been in the field right from the morning...People requested me and stopped my motorcade on the way. They told me about the murders happening around them, told me about the goons not allowing them to go to the polling booths...It should cause concern to all of us. This is the most sacred day for democracy...The election must be through ballots and not bullets," the Governor said while talking to reporters.

Central, state forces deployed at 61,636 polling booths

To conduct a fair, safe and impartial election for 3,317 Gram Panchayats, 341 Panchayat Samitis and 20 Zila Parishads in West Bengal on Saturday, security forces from Centre as well as the state were deployed at all 61,636 polling booths.

A total of 59,000 personnel of the Central Armed Police Forces (CAPF) and other State Armed Police (SAP) forces were deployed at sensitive polling booths and the rest of the troops of CAPF and SAP along with local State Police were given the responsibility of security at the remaining polling booths.

After completion of the polling process in the evening, all the ballot boxes will be kept secured in the 339 strong rooms across the State and the responsibility to secure the strong rooms is given to the Central Armed Police Forces (CAPF).

*(With inputs from agencies)*